
CHICKENPOX

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Chickenpox (also known as varicella) is a common but very contagious childhood illness. Although usually mild, chickenpox can be serious. The chickenpox (varicella) vaccine can help prevent the disease.

What causes chickenpox?

Chickenpox is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, a member of the herpes virus family.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms of chickenpox are a mild fever and a skin rash that begins as red bumps on the chest, back, underarms, neck and face. Within several hours, the bumps turn into small blisters; after a few days, the blisters break and then form scabs. The chickenpox sores often occur in clusters, with bumps, blisters and scabs all present at the same time.

Newborn babies, people who have weakened immune systems, and adults can get very sick from chickenpox.

How is the disease spread?

Chickenpox is spread from person to person through direct contact with fluid from the blisters or discharge from the nose or mouth. A person who has chickenpox can release tiny drops of the virus into the air by coughing or sneezing; another person can catch the disease by breathing in the drops of virus in the air.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms appear between 10 and 21 days (usually 14 to 16 days) after exposure to the disease.

For how long can someone spread chickenpox to others?

Chickenpox can be spread from one to two days before the rash appears until all blisters have become scabs (usually about five to six days after the first blisters appear).

How long should children who have chickenpox be excluded from activities?

The best way to prevent spreading chickenpox to others is for children who have the disease to stay home. Children who have chickenpox should be excluded from activities, including attending school or day care, until all the blisters have dried into scabs and no new blisters have started for 24 hours. This usually takes five to six days after the rash begins.

It takes 10 to 14 days after receiving the chickenpox vaccine for a person to develop immunity, and sometimes the vaccine doesn't work. Therefore, the following children also should be excluded from activities:

- Those who appear to have chickenpox even if they received the vaccine.
- Those who develop blisters between 10 and 21 days after vaccination.

Children who were exposed to chickenpox but who don't show any symptoms of the disease do not need to stay home unless they develop chickenpox.

Should I give aspirin to a child who has chickenpox?

When children take aspirin for viral illnesses like chickenpox, they are at risk of developing Reye syndrome, a serious condition that can cause death. **DO NOT GIVE ASPIRIN OR OTHER MEDICATION THAT CONTAINS SALICYLATE TO ANYONE YOUNGER THAN 18.** If you have any questions, call your health-care provider.

What can be done to prevent and control chickenpox?

The North Dakota Department of Health recommends the following:

1. All children between 12 months and 18 months of age should be vaccinated with one dose of chickenpox (varicella) vaccine. Unvaccinated children 12 months to 12 years of age who have not had chickenpox disease should receive one dose of the vaccine. People ages 13 and older who have not had chickenpox or who have not been vaccinated should receive two doses of vaccine at least four weeks apart.
2. If you think your child has chickenpox, call your health-care provider. Do not go to the health-care provider's office without calling first.
3. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after contact with secretions from the nose or mouth or with blister fluid. Thorough hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.
4. Unvaccinated people who have not had chickenpox should call their health-care provider immediately if they are exposed to someone who has chickenpox. Receiving the vaccine within three days (and possibly up to five days) after exposure may prevent the disease.
5. A pregnant woman, or someone with a weakened immune system, who is exposed to a person with chickenpox and who has not been vaccinated or has not previously had chickenpox should contact a health-care provider immediately for possible preventative treatment.

Because chickenpox is a reportable condition in North Dakota, all cases must be reported to the Department of Health. Cases may be reported online at the following website:
www.health.state.nd.us/disease/DiseaseCard.htm

For more information about chickenpox, contact your health-care provider or call the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.